

President Disputes Castro's Account

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The White House took sharp issue yesterday with Cuban President Fidel Castro's latest account of his dealings with Carter administration officials on Cuba's role in the rebel invasion of Zaire last month.

White House press secretary Jody Powell told reporters that "we are willing to place the records of veracity [of President Carter and Castro] side by side and let the American people decide for themselves."

Powell made his statement and senior White House officials gave additional details of U.S. diplomatic contacts with Castro in the wake of interviews granted by the Cuban leader on

Monday to two U.S. congressmen and three American reporters.

The lawmakers, Reps. Stephen J. Solarz (D-N.Y.) and Anthony C. Beilenson (D-Calif.), said in a news conference shortly after returning from Havana that nine hours of conversations with Castro had raised doubts in their minds about the U.S. version of Cuban involvement in the attack on Shaba Province.

Both men are members of the House International Relations Committee, where they heard Central Intelligence Agency Director Stansfield Turner present a secret version of the Carter administration's case last week. They called the U.S. evidence "not conclusive," "circumstantial" and "hearsay," but declined to say whether they believed Castro rather than Carter and his aides.

Solarz said Castro made "a very compelling case" that there was no Cuban involvement with Lunda tribesmen, also known as Katangans, who attacked several towns in Shaba Province early last month. He said that even if Carter proves to be mistaken, this may be due to "a faulty interpretation of circumstantial evidence" rather than conscious misrepresentations.

The lawmakers said they are making a report to their committee and are asking to see Carter.

Castro's interviews with the congressmen, U.S. reporters and information provided by White House and State Department officials yesterday suggests this sequence of events:

May 11-12—Katangese forces based in Angola staged attacks on Kolwezi and the surrounding area of Zaire's mineral-rich Shaba Province, their homeland.

May 16—The State Department, responding to questions, said through spokesman Hodding Carter: "We have no independent confirmation that Cubans are involved in the present action, but I have stressed that our information is sketchy. We have no hard information on recent raving of Katangans by Cubans."

May 17—Castro summoned Lyle F. Lane, senior U.S. diplomat in Havana, and denied any direct or indirect Cuban involvement in the Shaba attack. Castro told Lane he had heard rumors of an attack more than a month before and tried unsuccessfully to stop it through the Angolan government.

May 19—Lane delivered an oral response from Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance to Cuban Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Rene Anillo for transmission to Castro. According to Castro's version, Vance said that he and Carter had taken note of the Cuban's assurances that Cuba was not involved, and asked that Cuba make a public statement of noninvolvement.

Castro told the lawmakers that his message from the U.S. government was that the assurances were "appreciated." Rep. Solarz said Castro suggested that the message he received was an implicit admission that Cubans were not involved in the Shaba attack.

According to a senior White House official yesterday, "at no point did Lane state or imply that we accepted these assurances or claims at face value." The White House official said Lane had told the Cubans that the United States trusted the assurances were true because if they were not it would be a matter "of the gravest concern" to the U.S. government. The White House official said Cuban officials were asked to "express their concern publicly" about the attack.

The New York Times of May 19 carried a story from its Washington bureau reporting that Castro had called in Lane two days before and denied direct or indirect Cuban involvement in the Shaba invasion.

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At the White House on the morning of May 19, a meeting was convened under the chairmanship of David Aaron, deputy presidential assistant for national security, including representatives of the State and Defense departments and the CIA, primarily to discuss the U.S. airlift to Shaba and what should be said about it.

The CIA representative at the meeting, according to participants, said his agency has evidence that Cubans have been "recently" training the Katangans who attacked Shaba. The same day the White House instructed the State Department to make a statement to this effect through the press spokesman.

Spokesman Tom Reston, at the State Department noon briefing, volunteered that "new information is that it is now our understanding that the insurgents in Shaba Province have been trained recently by Cubans in Angola and that they are employing Soviet weapons." This was the first U.S. charge that Cuba was directly involved.

Later the same day a top State Department official, at a briefing for reporters, disclaimed any knowledge of "recent" training by Cubans.

According to the White House, it is "very possible" that the intelligence on which the May 19 public statements were made was not available to Vance when the message to Castro was drafted.

May 20—Cuba's Foreign Ministry issued a public statement saying: "The Cuban government categorically reiterates that there do not exist now, nor have there ever existed, ties of military cooperation between Cuba and these forces; that Cuba has not furnished any military equipment to them; that Cuba has not trained them or had any part in their actions and that there are no Cuban troops or technicians in Zaire."

May 25—Carter, in a press conference statement which had been drafted by a committee of White House and State Department officials meeting the night before and earlier that day, told a press conference in Chicago that Cuba shares "a burden and a responsibility" for the attack. "We believe that Cuba had known of the Katangan plan to invade and obviously did nothing to restrain them from crossing the border. We also knew that the Cubans have played a key role in training and equipping the Katangans who attacked."

In briefing for congressional committees last week, CIA Director Turner did not disclose that Castro had told the United States on May 17 that he had attempted to head off the invasion. This became widely known last weekend.

Yesterday Rep. Romano L. Mazzoli (D-Ky.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, said his group "might not have" endorsed the Carter administration's claim that Cuba bore responsibility for the invasion if Castro's statement had been available at the time of the briefing. Mazzoli accused the administration of

dealing "cavalierly" with the committee and called for additional information to be made available.

Committee Chairman Edward Boland (D-Mass.) said "nobody thought to ask" Turner if Castro had claimed to have made efforts to head off the invasion. Boland said he intends to ask the CIA chief to return to his committee to explain the sequence of events involving Castro.